

HUMOUR IN PALI LITERATURE

When one reads verse 146 of the *Dhammapada*:

'What laughter, what joy,
When the world is burning (with passions)?
Will you not seek a light,
You who are shrouded in darkness (of ignorance)?'¹

one is likely to come to the erroneous conclusion, if one does not know the context of this statement, that the Buddha categorically condemns all enjoyment in life. According to the Commentary,² these words were spoken by the Buddha on an occasion when a heedless group of women in a state of drunkenness visited him and began to dance and sing shamelessly in his presence.

There is a short sutta in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*³ which indicates that the Buddha did not appreciate immoderate laughter, guffawing, and showing one's teeth (*ativelam dantavidamsakam hasitam*), that he considered it childish (*komārakam*) in the Discipline of the Ariya (*ariyassa vinaye*). But he remarked that 'it is proper (sufficient) if you smile, just smile (*sitam sitamattāya*), when you are delighted with something (*dhammapamodita*)'.

The Commentary⁴ explains that when there is a reason for smiling one should smile showing the tips of the teeth, just to express one's delight. Further, it reminds us that the Buddha spoke these words as an admonition to the notorious group of six monks (*chabbaggiya*), when they went about singing, dancing and laughing boisterously.

The king of Kosala once told the Buddha that unlike many a disciple of other religious systems who looked haggard, coarse, pale, emaciated and unprepossessing, his disciples were 'joyful and elated (*haṭṭha-pahaṭṭha*), jubilant and exultant (*udaggudagga*), enjoying the spiritual life (*abhiratarūpa*), with pleased faculties (*pīṇitindriya*), free from anxiety (*appossukka*), serene (*panna-loma*), unconcerned (depending on others) (*paradavutta*) and living with a gazelle's mind (*migabhūtena cetasā*), i.e. light-hearted'. The king added that he believed that this healthy disposition was due to the fact that 'these venerable ones had certainly realized

the great and full significance of the Exalted One's teaching'.⁵

This indeed is so. If one is truly 'religious', morally, spiritually and intellectually, then one is surely happy and joyful. A refined sense of humour is to be found in such people. Buddhism is quite opposed to a melancholic, sorrowful, pessimistic and gloomy attitude of mind, which is considered a hindrance to the realization of Truth. On the other hand, it is interesting to remember here that joy (*pīti*) is one of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment (*bojjhaṅga*), essential qualities to be cultivated for the realization of Nibbāna.

During the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Christian missionaries and many Western Buddhologists, who failed to understand correctly the first Noble Truth (*dukkha-sacca*), wrote and spoke about Buddhism as a pessimistic religion.⁶ Their misconception and prejudice might probably have influenced the minds of most of the subsequent Western students of Buddhism. They evidently assumed that Buddhist literature was always serious and gloomy, bereft of any kind of sense of humour or joy in life. Consequently they failed to notice the subtle and serene sense of humour often found in the Pali texts. On the contrary, present-day visitors from the West to such Buddhist countries as Sri Lanka find there people happy, cheerful and light-hearted—often disconcertingly so.

Material relating to this lighter side of life, revealing a sense of humour at different levels, scattered throughout Pali Literature—canonical, commentarial and folklore—would fill a fair-sized book. In this short article a few examples, mostly summarized, only from the Pali Canon and Commentaries are provided.

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A few weeks after his Enlightenment, when the Buddha was seated under a banyan tree known as Ajapāla-nigrodha in the vicinity of the Bodhi tree, a brāhmaṇa visited him. The original Pali texts⁷ which relate this story do not give the real name of the man, but introduce him as *aññataro huhumka-jātiko*⁸ *brāhmaṇo* 'a certain brāhmaṇa in the habit of saying *huhum*'. Out of conceit and arrogance, he would utter this sound contemptuously, in order to belittle others and whatever they said. (His counter-

parts exist today). The English expression 'to pooh-pooh' would render it effectively.

The Buddha lived in Uruvelā for a fairly long period prior to his Enlightenment. This brāhmaṇa might have been a native of the region. So they might probably have known each other earlier. He asked the Buddha to what extent one was a brāhmaṇa and what qualities went to make a brāhmaṇa. The Buddha, in answer, enumerating a few qualities such as abstinence from evil, absence of impurity in character, self-control, living the holy life, included indifferently in the list 'not uttering *huhum* (not pooh-poohing)'.

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Once at Rājagaha a wandering ascetic (*paribbājaka*) named Dīghanakha (Long-nail) went to see the Buddha and asserted: 'Venerable Gotama, I say this, I hold this view: "Nothing (no view) is pleasing to me"'.

Then the Buddha observed: 'But this view of yours "Nothing is pleasing to me," is it too not pleasing to you?'⁹

(After this humorous remark and Dīghanakha's evasive reply that if this view were pleasing to him, it would also be so, the Buddha proceeded to give him a deep philosophical and spiritual exposition of views (*diṭṭhi*). At the end of this discourse Dīghanakha became a *sotāpanna* (Stream-entrant) and Sāriputta (Dīghanakha's uncle and the Buddha's Chief Disciple) who was fanning the Master standing behind him, became an arahant).

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As the Buddha was completely free from ideas of self and conceit, he could receive any insult without being mentally hurt and could meet it with good humour without a touch of bitterness, often making use of it to benefit his insulter.

Again at Rājagaha, a brāhmaṇa of the Bhāradvāja clan,¹⁰ incensed that his brother had become a disciple of the Buddha and entered the Order of the Saṅgha, went to see the Master and insulted and abused him. When the brāhmaṇa had finished vilifying the Buddha to his heart's content, the Compassionate One quietly asked him:

'Do you sometimes receive visits from your friends and relatives?'

'Yes, sometimes I do'.

'Do you offer them foods and drinks?'

'Yes, sometimes I do'.

'But if they do not accept your foods and drinks, then whose property do those things become?'

'Then those things are for ourselves'.

'Now, in the same way, Brāhmaṇa, you have offered me abuse and insult, but I do not accept it. So now, Brāhmaṇa, it is for yourself; it is for yourself!'¹¹

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Another brāhmaṇa called Verañja (in Verañjā) went to the Buddha and attacked him with studied derogatory phrases, imputing evil and 'irreligious' dispensation and attitude to him according to the brahmanic lore:

'Master Gotama propounds the theory of inaction (*akiriyavāda*)'.

'Yes, Brāhmaṇa, one might rightly say so. Brāhmaṇa, I declare inaction of (absence from) physical, verbal and mental misconduct, inaction of all kinds of evil and bad things. So one might rightly say that the recluse Gotama declares inaction'.

'Master Gotama is an annihilationist (*uccheda-vāda*)'.

'Yes, Brāhmaṇa, one might rightly say so. Brāhmaṇa, I declare the annihilation (cutting off) of lust, hatred, and ignorance, annihilation of all kinds of evil and bad things. So one might rightly say that the recluse Gotama is an annihilationist'.

In this manner, whatever term Verañja intended as insult, the Buddha quietly and dispassionately turned it aside to signify something spiritually and morally important.

At the end, after a lengthy discussion, Verañja was so satisfied that he became a lay disciple (*upāsaka*) of the Master.¹²

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One day at Kapilavatthu, the capital of the Sakyas, the Buddha, after his alms-round and meal, went to the Great Wood (Mahāvana) near the city and sat down under a tree for his mid-day siesta. A Sakyan, introduced in the text¹³ as Daṇḍa-pāṇi (Stick-in-hand),¹⁴ was also out walking in the Great Wood and came to the place where the Buddha was seated. (Daṇḍa-pāṇi was related to the Buddha,¹⁵ and most probably they knew each other. According to the Commentary, this prince was partial to Devadatta, the Buddha's cousin and enemy, and was unsympathetic towards the Exalted One).¹⁶ Having greeted the Buddha, he stood on one side leaning on his stick and asked the Buddha:

'What is the theory of the recluse (*samaṇa*, referring to the Buddha)? What does he teach?'

Now, at that time in North India, it was considered impolite and discourteous to talk standing to a venerable person who is seated (usually on the ground), or to talk seated to such a person who is standing.¹⁷ So, the attitude of Daṇḍa-pāṇi—not only did he stand but he also leant on his precious staff¹⁸—talking to the Buddha who was seated, was surely haughty. The Buddha undoubtedly knew that the man put him the question, not with a desire to learn, but to show his arrogance. So the Enlightened One answered him in a fitting manner:

'Friend, if some one propounding a theory in this world with its devas, māras, brahmas, its population of *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas*, of devas and men, does not come into conflict with anyone else, and how the perceptions do not obsess the person who lives not fettered to sense-pleasures, without wavering doubts, with no remorse, without craving for all forms of becoming, Friend, I propound such a theory; I do teach such a doctrine'.

This was all Greek to Daṇḍa-pāṇi. He shook his head, wagged his tongue, knitted his wrinkled forehead and walked away—with stick!¹⁹

(Bhikkhus, who heard about this incident from the Buddha, also could not perceive the meaning of the Master's reply and desired to learn it. The Buddha clarified it very briefly. But later, at the request of those bhikkhus, Mahā-Kaccāna Thera, foremost

among analytical exponents of the Dhamma (A I 23) gave a detailed explanation. His exposition was approved by the Buddha. The whole narrative is now called *Madhupiṇḍika-sutta* 'Ball of Honey', No. 18 of the *Majjhima-nikāya*).

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The *Mahāsthānāda-sutta*, 'The Great Discourse on the Lion's Roar' (No. 12 of the *Majjhima-nikāya*), is awe-inspiring. In it, various virtues and powers of the Buddha are described as well as the terrible austerities he practised during the period of self-mortification before his Enlightenment. The discourse was delivered to Sāriputta, his chief disciple. The Buddha related that as there were some religious teachers who believed that spiritual purity could be achieved through the control of food, he lived for a period on one jujube berry (*kola*), or a grain of rice, a day. Then he interjected lightheartedly: 'Sāriputta, it may occur to you that the jujube berry might perhaps have been bigger at that time. Sāriputta, you should not think so. At that time too the jujube berry was of the same size as it is today'. (The same was said of a grain of rice).

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When the above discourse (*Mahāsthānāda-sutta*) was being delivered, the Venerable Nāgasamāla was standing behind the Buddha fanning him. (It must have been hot that day at Vesālī). At the end of the discourse Nāgasamāla told the Master: 'Wonderful, Sir; marvellous, Sir. But Sir, when I listened to this discourse, my hair stood on end! What is the name of this discourse?'

The Buddha simply said: 'Then, Nāgasamāla, remember it as the "Hair-standing Discourse" (*Lomaṃsa-pariyāya*)!'

(But in the *Majjhima-nikāya* it is always known and titled as *Mahāsthānāda-sutta* 'The Great Discourse on the Lion's Roar').

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Once the Buddha was staying in the Pāvārika Mango Grove near Nālandā, when Sāriputta came to the Master and made this affirmation:

'Sir, such faith have I in the Exalted One that I think that there never has been, nor will there be, nor is there now any other recluse (*samaṇa*) or brāhmaṇa who is greater in Super-Knowledge (*abhiññā*), that is to say, with regard to Enlightenment (*sambodhi*)'.

The Buddha had very high regard for Sāriputta whom he considered the most intelligent of all his disciples. But the Master did not, it seems approve or appreciate this kind of faith or praise, yet at the same time he did not like to censure his chief disciple out of respect for him. So the Enlightened One gently observed:

'Sāriputta, you have uttered great and bold words. You have taken a definite stand. You have roared the lion's roar. . . . So, Sāriputta, you have known all those Exalted Ones, fully enlightened, arahant Buddhas who lived in the past, perceiving their minds with your mind, comprehending that they were of such virtue, of such nature, of such wisdom, of such conduct and of such emancipation?'

'No, Sir'.

'Then of course, Sāriputta, you know all those Exalted Ones, fully enlightened, arahant Buddhas who will come in the long ages of the future, perceiving their minds with your mind, comprehending that they will be of such virtue, of such nature, of such wisdom, of such conduct and of such emancipation?'

'Certainly not, Sir'.

'But then, Sāriputta, perhaps you know me, now an arhant, a Fully Enlightened One, perceiving my mind with your mind, comprehending that the Exalted One is of such virtue, of such nature, of such wisdom, of such conduct and of such emancipation?'

'Indeed not, Sir'.

'Then, Sāriputta, you have no knowledge penetrating the minds (*cetopariyañāṇa*) of the arahant, fully enlightened Buddhas of the past, future or present. Why then really, Sāriputta, have you uttered such great and bold words? Why did you take up such a definite stand? Why did you roar the lion's roar. . . ?'

(But Sāriputta gave a long explanation justifying his position).²⁰

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One day the following question occurred to a certain bhikkhu: 'Now, where do these four Great Elements, namely, solidity (*paṭhavi*), fluidity (*āpo*), heat (*tejo*) and motion (*vāyo*) cease, leaving no trace behind?'

Then with his supernatural *iddhi* powers the bhikkhu went to the Heaven of the Four Great Kings (Cātummahārājika) and put his question to the gods there. They confessed that they did not know the answer, but said that the Four Great Kings (Rulers of that heaven) who were more exalted and superior to them would know it. So the bhikkhu approached them. But they too admitted their ignorance and directed him to the gods of the higher heaven, still more exalted and superior. They, too, in their turn, admitted their ignorance and sent him on to still higher and superior devas. In this manner the bhikkhu, being directed to higher and higher heavens, arrived at the sixth heaven (Paranimmita-vasavatti), highest in the sphere of sense-pleasures (*kāmāvacara*). But the gods in this heaven too admitted that they did not know the answer to the question, and sent him on to the Brahma-world which is still higher and superior. When the bhikkhu reached the Brahma-world and put his question to the gods of the Retinue of Brahma, they admitted their ignorance and said that there was the Mahā-Brahma, the Great Brahma, more exalted and superior to them and that he surely would know the answer. (According to Brahmanic lore, Brahma is the Creator of the world, the Supreme God).

The Great Brahma appeared and the bhikkhu put the question to him: 'Now, friend, where do these Four Great Elements. . . cease, leaving no trace behind?'

The Great Brahma, in answer, made an impressive but irrelevant declaration: 'Bhikkhu, I am Brahma, the Great Brahma, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the Omniscient, the Ruler, the Supreme, the Maker, the Creator, the Chief, the Assignor, the Master, the Father of all that are and are to be'.

The bhikkhu, obviously unimpressed, said quietly: 'Friend, I do not ask you whether you are the Brahma, the Great Brahma. . .

the Father of all that are and are to be. But I ask you where the Four Great Elements . . . cease, leaving no trace behind'.

Again the Great Brahma repeated his boastful bluster, and the bhikkhu, for the third time, calmly repeated his question. Then the Mahā-Brahma took the bhikkhu by the arm and led him aside and whispered: 'These gods of the Retinue of Brahma hold me to be such that there is nothing I have not seen, nothing I have not known, nothing I have not realized. Therefore I did not answer in their presence. I, too, Bhikkhu, do not know where these Four Great Elements—solidity, fluidity, heat and motion—cease, leaving no trace behind. Therefore, Bhikkhu, it is your own fault, your own mistake that you, disregarding the Exalted One, went out in search of an answer to your question. Go now, Bhikkhu, approach the Exalted One yourself and put this question to him and learn as he explains it'.

So the bhikkhu returned to the Master and put the question to him. The Buddha with a touch of humour referred to a practice of ancient navigators: Sea-faring traders in the past used to take with them a land-sighting bird. When the ship got far out of sight of the shore, they would let the land-sighting bird free. The bird would fly in all directions, and if it caught sight of land, it would fly there. If no land was visible all round in any direction, it would come back to the ship. 'Even so, after all these wanderings, right up to the Brahma-world, you came back to me!' the Buddha said.

Then the Enlightened One pointed out to the bhikkhu that his question was wrongly worded, and after formulating it correctly, gave him the answer.²¹ (We hope that the bhikkhu understood it!)

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If one asks why a fool is like the spoon and an intelligent person is like the tongue, this may be taken as a humorous modern quiz, a puzzle or riddle. But one should not overlook, nor fail to appreciate, the Buddha's sense of humour when one reads the *Dhammapada* verse 64:

'Though a fool all his life associates with a wise man, he does not perceive the Truth (*Dhamma*), just as a spoon (does not perceive) the taste of the soup'.²²

and the verse 65:

'If an intelligent person associates with a wise man even for a moment, he quickly perceives the Truth (*Dhamma*), just as the tongue (perceives) the taste of the soup'.²³

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Brāhmaṇas always claimed that only they were the genuine sons of Brahma (God) (*brahmuṇo puttā orasā*), born of his mouth (*mukhato jātā*), the offspring of Brahma (*brahmajā*), created by Brahma (*brahmanimmitā*), heirs to Brahma (*brahma-dāyādā*).

With regard to this famous conceited claim of the brāhmaṇas, the Buddha told Vāseṭṭha, one of his brāhmaṇa disciples:

'Surely, Vāseṭṭha, brāhmaṇas have quite forgotten the past when they say that they are the genuine sons of Brahma, born of his mouth. . . Certainly, Vāseṭṭha, brāhmaṇa wives of brāhmaṇas (*brāhmaṇī*) are known to have their seasons, to have been pregnant, have given birth to children and to have been suckling them. Yet these brāhmaṇas themselves born of the womb itself (*yonijā va*) like everyone else, speak thus: ". . . only brāhmaṇas are genuine sons of Brahma, born of his mouth, the offspring of Brahma," . . . And so they slander Brahma, they speak untruth and earn much demerit'.²⁴

The Commentary makes this subtle humour obvious when it explains that if the word of the brāhmaṇas were true, then the mouth of Brahma would be 'the path of flowing' of brāhmaṇa women (*brāhmaṇīnaṃ passāvamaggo brahmuṇo mukham bhaveyya*).²⁵

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Once in Sāvattī many recluses, brāhmaṇas, various ascetics, holding different philosophical and metaphysical views, each claiming his to be the only truth and the rest nonsense (*idam eva saccaṃ, mogham aññaṃ*), were quarrelling, wrangling and disputing among themselves, wounding one another with 'the weapons of the tongue' (*mukhasattī*).²⁶ Some bhikkhus reported this to the Enlightened One.

Then the Buddha said that these recluses, brāhmaṇas and ascetics were blind (*andhā*), without eyes (*acakkhukā*), and that they did not know the Truth (*Dhamma*) or what was not-Truth (*a-Dhamma*). He then related the following story:

Once upon a time there was a king in that very city of Sāvatti. He called a man and ordered him: 'Go and gather together all those in Sāvatti who are born blind'.

The man got them together and reported it to the king. Then the king said: 'Go and show them an elephant'.

So the man went and showed an elephant to those who were born blind: to some he showed the elephant's head saying 'this is the elephant'; to some, the elephant's ears; to some others, the elephant's tusks; to still others, the elephant's trunk, foot, back, tail and so on, and told the king that an elephant had been shown to all those who were born blind.

Then the king went to the place where those blind men were gathered and asked them: 'Have you seen the elephant?'

'Yes, Sire', they replied.

'Then tell me, what sort of a thing is the elephant?'

Those who felt the elephant's head said: 'Sire, the elephant is like a pot'. Those who touched an ear said: 'The elephant is like a winnowing-basket'. Those who felt a foot said that the elephant was like a pillar, and those who touched the tail said that the elephant was just like a broom and so on and so forth, according to what they had touched and felt. Then the blind men began to quarrel and fight among themselves, shouting: 'It is not so'. 'Yes, it is so'. 'The elephant is not that'. 'Yes, it is like that'.

The Buddha then explained that so were those recluses, brāhmaṇas, wanderers who wrangled and quarrelled about the Truth. They had seen only a fragment of it (*ekaṅga-dassino*).²⁷

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Philosophical, spiritual and psychological humour, all rolled into one, is found in the Buddha's criticism of the brāhmaṇas' (for that matter, of all peoples') attitude towards emancipation, liberation, 'salvation' through mere faith and belief without

direct knowledge and experience, as recorded in the *Tevijja-sutta* (No. XIII) of the *Dīgha-nikāya*.

Brāhmaṇas claimed that they knew and declared the Path, the Direct Path (*ujumagga*) leading to the union with Brahma (God) (*brahmasahavyatā*). The Buddha inquired from his interlocutor Vāseṭṭha, a young brāhmaṇa, whether there was even a single one of the brāhmaṇas versed in the three Vedas who had seen Brahma (God) face to face, directly (*brahmā sakkhi-dīṭṭho*).

Vāseṭṭha said: 'No'.

'Then, Vāseṭṭha, was there even any one of their teachers who had seen Brahma face to face?'

'No'.

'Not one of the teachers of their teachers?'

'No'.

'Not even a single one up to the seventh generation of their teachers?'

'No'.

'Well then, those ancient Rishis (*pubbakā isayo*), the authors of the sacred hymns (*mantānaṃ kattāro*), did even they say: "We know it, we have seen where Brahma is, whence Brahma is, whither Brahma is?"'

'Not even they'.

'Now, Vāseṭṭha, neither any one of the brāhmaṇas versed in the three Vedas has seen Brahma (God) face to face (directly), nor any one of their teachers up to the seventh generation, nor even any one of those ancient Rishis who were the authors of the sacred hymns which are recited and recited by the brāhmaṇas. Then what the brāhmaṇas versed in the three Vedas say amounts to this: "We declare the way to the union with that state which we do not know, which we do not see. This is the direct way to union with Brahma (God)"'.

'Vāseṭṭha, this is not possible, this is senseless talk (*apāṭiḥTrakataṃ bhāsitaṃ*). This is like a string of these blind men clinging to one another: neither the foremost, nor the middle one, nor the last sees. Even so, the talk of the brāhmaṇas versed in the three Vedas is, it seems, blind talk. Neither first, nor the middle one, nor the last sees.

So this talk of those brāhmaṇas versed in the three Vedas becomes just ridiculous, mere words—empty and vain’.

Then the Buddha relating various humorous similes goes on to ridicule this attitude of the brāhmaṇas: It is like a man who desires to get the *janapada-kalyāṇī* (the beauty queen of the country), but does not know anything about her; or like a man building a staircase to climb to a mansion which he does not see; or like a man who wants to cross a river which is full and invokes the further bank saying: ‘Come hither, O further bank! come over to this side!’, or simply sleeps on the bank (sleep of ignorance), and so on and so forth.

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After these few examples from the Pali Canon, let us now take some from the Pali Commentaries too.

The story of a quarrel of two ascetics, Devala and Nārada, both of whom had supernatural powers, provides a fine piece of humour. Devala decided to spend a night in the *atelier* of a potter. Nārada, who arrived later, also decided to spend the night in the same place. After formal greetings and conversation, when they were about to go to sleep, Nārada carefully noted where Devala was going to sleep and also where the door was. But later, during the night, Devala changed his mind and slept across the door.

In the night, Nārada going out trampled on Devala’s head. Devala angrily scolded him: ‘You false ascetic, you trampled on my head’. Immediately Nārada apologized politely saying, ‘Please excuse me, Master, I did not know that you were sleeping here’, and went out.

Devala thought that Nārada would trample on his head again when he returned and changed his position, this time putting his head where his feet had been earlier. Nārada entering the shed, in order to avoid trampling on Devala’s head again, walked slowly on the side of his feet, but this time trampled on his neck!

Devala became furious and yelled that he would curse him. Nārada apologized, expressing his deep regret and asserting that he did not know that Devala had changed his position, that he

never trampled on him knowingly, and that the whole thing was a mistake.

But Devala would not listen. ‘False ascetic’, he shouted, ‘I will curse you’.

‘Please, don’t do it, Master’.

In spite of Nārada’s apology and entreaty, Devala cursed him uttering that Nārada’s head would split into seven pieces at sunrise!

‘Master’, said Nārada solemnly, ‘while I was affirming that it was not my fault, you cursed me. But, may the head of him who is guilty, and not the head of him who is innocent, split into seven at sunrise!’ This was in effect a curse.

Now Nārada had power of seeing the past and future. He saw that Devala’s head, and not his, would split into seven when the sun rose in the morning. So he took pity on this capricious ascetic and stopped the sunrise by his supernatural power.

This petty personal quarrel between two ascetics in a potter’s shed plunged the whole world into catastrophe. When sunrise was mysteriously delayed, people became restless, and went to the palace gate and appealed to the king. It was discovered that this unnatural phenomenon was due to the curses of these two ascetics. The king, with a retinue bearing torch lights, hurried to the potter’s shed. Nārada explained the whole episode. Now, the only way to avoid Devala’s head being split into seven at sunrise was for him to apologize to Nārada. But Devala was adamant. He would not apologize to Nārada even at the request of the king. So the king ordered his men to hold Devala by force and bend his head down at the feet of Nārada. ‘Please, get up, Master’, said Nārada, ‘I pardon you’. But Nārada knew that the apology was not genuine, as it was not voluntary. So the danger remained.

But Nārada suggested an expedient. The king should take Devala into the lake adjoining the city, order him to plunge in the water up to his neck, with a lump of earth on his head representing another head. Then Nārada would release the sun, but exactly at the appearance of the sun’s rays, Devala should immerse himself in the water, emerge in another place and so escape. When the sun rose, the lump of earth, the ‘false head’ on Devala’s head, split into seven, and Devala immersed himself in

the water and escaped. Thus a great universal catastrophe was averted.²⁸

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On another occasion the sun was obliged to suspend its course for a short while just to allow a little *sāmaṇera* (novice) sufficient time to attain arahantship and then to have his meal before noon, i.e. before it crossed the zenith of the sky.

Paṇḍita Sāmaṇera, the little pupil of Sāriputta Thera (the Buddha's Chief Disciple), was seven years old and had entered the Order only a week previously. On the eighth day, the child decided to meditate and become an arahant. So without going alms-begging, he sat down alone meditating in his teacher's room. Sāriputta Thera went out alms-begging.

Sakka, the king of gods, was moved, as usual on such occasions, by this stupendous determination, virtue and piety. He took every precaution to help Paṇḍita attain arahantship and have his meal before the sun crossed the zenith of the sky. So, among other things, Sakka asked the Sun-God (*Suriya-Devaputta*) to suspend the course of the sun. Before noon the *sāmaṇera* had attained to the first three stages on the way to perfection, namely, *sotāpatti*, *sakadāgāmi* and *anāgāmi* stages. But arahantship had still to be attained. So the sun had to remain standing just at the zenith without crossing it, till the *sāmaṇera* attained full perfection and had his meal, however long all this might take.

Sāriputta Thera, who was out alms-begging, had his meal in a house where he was invited and was hurrying back with some food for his little disciple as it was rather getting late. But the Buddha who knew that Paṇḍita Sāmaṇera would attain arahantship before his meal, but was still trying for it, intercepted Sāriputta and began to put some questions to him in order to allow time for the *sāmaṇera* to attain his goal undisturbed.

By the time Sāriputta Thera arrived and knocked at the door, his little pupil had just attained arahantship. When Paṇḍita Sāmaṇera had finished his meal and washed the alms-bowl the sun quickly crossed the zenith and covered at one stretch the distance it had to. Suddenly the shadows lengthened, and people wondered what had happened.²⁹

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Once, more than fifteen centuries ago, there seems to have taken place at Anurādhapura in Sri Lanka something like a 'beauty contest', not between girls but between a monk and a minister's son. Abhaya Thera and the minister's son (his name is not given) were equally handsome, and there was discussion in the city as to who was the handsomer. With the idea of seeing them both together, the relatives of the minister's son dressed him elegantly and took him to worship at the Mahācetiya (modern Ruvanvāli-sāya) at Anurādhapura, while the therā's mother sent her son a beautiful robe, requesting him to shave his head and put on the new robe and go to the Mahācetiya followed by monks. Abhaya Thera met the minister's son at the courtyard of the Mahācetiya and observed: 'Having thrown away the rubbish that the old monk had swept, you now come to compete with me!'

This mysterious remark goes back to a previous existence. The old monk mentioned was Abhaya Thera himself in a previous birth. In that life the therā had swept the courtyard of a *cetiya* (*dāgāba*) and collected the rubbish in a heap. The minister's son at that time was an ordinary layman in the village and took and threw away this heap of rubbish.³⁰ (The physical beauty of the therā was one of the results of the meritorious deed of his cleaning a holy place. If the man who threw away the rubbish swept and collected by the monk became so handsome, then the monk himself who had swept and cleaned the sacred place must have, obviously, been still handsomer).

* * * * *

Pali Commentaries on the *Tipiṭaka* speak of thousands of arahants living in different monasteries, forest dwellings and caves in ancient Sri Lanka. An arahant (*khīṇāsava*) therā, who lived at Cittala-pabbata (modern Situl-pavva) in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka, had as his companion and attendant a monk who had entered the Order of the Sangha in his old age. Obviously, this old monk must have heard people talk of arahants living in the country. He desired to meet one of these holy men. One day he was following the arahant therā, carrying his alms-bowl and robe, and asked: 'What sort of people are ariyas?'³¹

'Ariyas are difficult to recognize, my friend', said the therā.

'Now, certain old people, even attending on ariyas, going about with them carrying their alms-bowls and robes, do not recognize them'.

Even then the old monk could not catch the point of the remark.³²

* * * * *

Sometimes young monks were far too jovial and light-hearted. There is a story of certain young monks at a monastery called Bherapāsāṇa-vihāra in Rohaṇa, Sri Lanka, who played a practical joke on a half-wit named Uttara who lived with them in the monastery.

The young monks told Uttara that the *aggi-sālā* (fire-hall) was leaking, and went out with him into the jungle to bring some grass to thatch the roof. When the grass was cut and tied into small bundles, the monks inquired from Uttara whether he could carry fifty bundles. He said 'no'. Then they asked him whether he could not carry 'even eighty'. Uttara refused that too.

'But, then, surely you can take *one* hundred bundles?' the monks inquired.

'That I can', said the idiot and carried the heap of one hundred bundles to the monastery with great hardship.

Other monks at the monastery observed that Uttara looked tired. 'Yes, Sirs', he admitted. 'These young monks tried to deceive me. When I could not raise even this *one* hundred, they wanted me to carry fifty bundles of grass!'

'Yes, Uttara, they have deceived you!' was the sympathetic remark of the monks.³³

* * * * *

The Jātaka Commentary is rich in humour and satire on social and individual vices and follies (*Mātaṅga-jātaka*, *Mahā-ummagga-jātaka*, etc.). A healthy sense of humour is abundantly evident both among monks and lay people in Pali folk literature such as *Sahassa-vatthu*, *Sīthala-vatthu* and *Rasavāhinī*. The discussion of material available in those sources has to be deferred.

The traditional sense of humour occurs not only in written

records in Pali but also in the ordinary daily life of the people. There is in Sri Lanka a small circular cake known as *koṇḍa-kāvum*. It is made of rice flour, palm honey and some other ingredients, fried in coconut oil, and is served on all important occasions. The centre of this cake, called the *buriya* or 'navel', which is made to stand out like a lump, is supposed to be its sweetest part. As such, people usually eat it last. Once at an alms-giving at the royal palace during the Kandyan kingdom (18th century), a Buddhist monk called Kunkunāve, known for his dry humour, ate the *buriya* first. This was most unusual. The king, who was personally serving the monks, asked him why he had done this. The monk quietly answered in a serious tone: 'Life is impermanent!'³⁴

LONDON

WALPOLA RAHULA

Notes

- 1 *Ko nu hāso kim ānando, niccam pajjalite sati? Andhakārena onaddhā padīpam na gavassatha?*
- 2 Dhp-a III 100 foll.
- 3 A I 261 (No. 103).
- 4 Mp II 366.
- 5 M II 121.
- 6 For an interpretation of the first Noble Truth, see Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Gordon Fraser Gallery, Ltd., London, 1978, or Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1974, pp. 16-28.
- 7 Vin I 2; Ud 3.
- 8 *jātiko* here does not mean 'of the class' or 'belonging to a group', but 'having the nature of', 'in the habit of', like *mukhara-jātiko* which means 'of talkative or garrulous nature'. See also F.L. Woodward, *Verses of Uplift (Udāna)*, SBB VIII, London 1948, p. 3, n. 1, and I.B. Horner, *BD IV (Mahāvagga)*, SBB XIV, London, 1964, p. 3, n. 3.
- 9 M I 497, *Dīghanakha-sutta* (No. 74).
- 10 In the Pali text (S I 161) this brāhmaṇa is named Akkosaka-Bhāradvāja 'Reviling Bhāradvāja'. The Commentary (Spk I 229) says that this sobriquet was bestowed on him by the Members of the Council (*saṅgītikārahehi*).
- 11 S I 161 foll. The sutta goes on to report that after further discussion with the Buddha, Akkosaka-Bhāradvāja was so pleased

- that he himself became a disciple of the Compassionate One, entered the Order and became an *arahant*.
- 12 A IV 172 foll. *Kasībharadvāja-sutta* (Sn p. 12) *Vasala-sutta* (Sn p. 21) relate similar stories.
- 13 M I 108.
- 14 Daṇḍa-pāṇi, lit. meaning 'Stick-in-hand' or 'Staff-in-hand' is evidently a nickname, and not his real name. He was so referred to because he always carried a stick or a staff. The Commentary says it was a golden staff, *suvaṇṇa-daṇḍa* (Ps II 73). Such nicknames were not uncommon in ancient India, and they indicate a healthy sense of humour among the people. Huhumka-jātika, Dīgha-nakha, (both already mentioned above), Kūṭa-danta 'Pointed-tooth' (D I 127), Dīgha-jānu 'Long-knee' (A IV 281), Anguli-māla 'Finger-garland' (M II 97), Tamba-dāṭhika 'Copper-coloured-beard' (Dhp-a II 35; 203) are some examples.
- 15 See G.P. Malalasekera, *DPPN*, s.v. Daṇḍapāṇi.
- 16 Ps II 73.
- 17 See D I 90.
- 18 Ps II 73 describes vividly how he planted his stick in front like a 'cow-herd' (*gopāla-dāraka*), put his palm on it pressing his jaw on the back of his palm.
- 19 M I 108-9.
- 20 *Sampasādaniya-sutta*, No. 28 of the *Dīgha-nikāya*.
- 21 *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*, No. 11 of the *Dīgha-nikāya*.
- 22 *Yāvaṭṭam pi ce bālo paṇḍitam payirupāsati, na so dhammaṃ vijānāti dabbhī sūparam yathā.*
- 23 *Muhuttam api ce viññū paṇḍitam payirupāsati, khippam dhammaṃ vijānāti jivhā sūparam yathā.*
- 24 D III 81-2.
- 25 Sv III 862.
- 26 Harsh, insulting, offensive words are considered 'weapons of the tongue'. Cf. Sn 657: *Purisassa hi jātassa, kuṭhārī jāyate mukhe* 'Indeed an axe is born in the mouth of any person born'.
- 27 Ud 66-9.
- 28 Dhp-a I 39-43. *Mātanga-jātaka* (No. 497) also relates a similar episode.
- 29 Dhp-a II 138 foll.
- 30 Sp 1336-7.
- 31 *Ariya* means 'Noble One', but the term is used in opposition to *puthujjana* 'worldling'. In this sense, the term *ariya* refers to any person—monk, nun, layman or laywoman—who has realized one of the eight stages of 'holiness'. For details, see s.v. *ariya*, Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, Colombo, 1972. But in our story, *ariya* evidently signifies an *arahant*.
- 32 Ps I 22, 1-8.
- 33 Mp II 347.
- 34 This story is orally transmitted.

A FURTHER NOTE ON PALI GOTRABHŪ

In an interesting article entitled '*Gotrabhū*: Die sprachliche Vergeschichte eines philosophischen Terminus', published in 1978, O. von Hinüber has contributed to the discussion of the Pali term *gotrabhū*, which usually designates a person achieving the spiritual stage of an Ariya or Saint on the path.¹ And comparing for the etymology the word *vatrabhū* 'Vṛtrahan' (i.e. Śakra = Indra) appearing in S I 47 and Ja V 153, he has suggested that the element *bhū* corresponds to *han* and that *gotrabhū* accordingly meant 'das Geschlecht vernichtend' (p. 331).² The same interpretation has also been put forth by O.H. de A. Wijesekera in a short article, published in 1979, entitled 'The etymology of Pali *Gotrabhū*',³ there the term is translated as 'killer (i.e. destroyer) of the *gotra*' (p. 382). Both writers compare also *bhūnahu* = *bhrūṇahan* 'embryo-killer'.

The explanation proposed by these two scholars is attractive inasmuch as it could indeed account for the use in M III 256 of *gotrabhū* in an unfavourable context.⁴ As noted in my earlier article, this usage—which diverges from that found elsewhere in the canonical and commentarial Pali literature—is isolated; and it raises a difficulty so long as one supposes the element *bhū* to be related to the root *bhū* 'to be'. Their suggestion appears moreover to find support in the explanation given by a Pali exegetical tradition which interprets *bhū* as equivalent to *abhi-bhū* 'to conquer, overcome'.⁵

However, it is not altogether clear how this proposed explanation can account for the overwhelming majority of attestations of the term in the Pali scriptures and commentaries where the term is on the contrary used in a favourable meaning, and where a Pali exegetical tradition interprets *bhū* also as meaning *bhāveti* 'cultivates' (= *nibbatteti* 'develops').⁶ Following Wijesekera (*op. cit.*, p. 382), it seems that we are to understand here that the spiritual aspirant by destroying the *gotra* transcends his worldly—and worldling (*puthujjana*)—status in order to accede to a higher spiritual status. Yet not only is this clearly not the meaning of *gotrabhū* in the M passage referred to above where the context is